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ABSTRACT

Historically, the business community has been concerned with educational issues. The United States Chamber of Commerce has had an active educational committee involved in shaping federal education policy since the 1960s. Local and state school systems, along with business leaders, parent-teacher associations, advisory boards, and school finance committees have also developed business/education partnerships. Three conditions have been identified that highlight the new challenges facing business and education leaders. First, there has been an increase in teen and adult illiteracy rates in the United States. Second, this country is facing severe shortages of skilled workers due to the shift from industrial to high technology jobs. Third, the United States is encountering unprecedented international competition. In recent years, educational improvement "success stories" have included activities such as adopt-a-school systems, fellowships and internships for teachers, loaned equipment, and initiatives for support of new school financing. Some partnerships between business and education are (1) Tenneco Oil Company and the Houston, Texas, Independent School District; (2) Pinellas Suncoast Chamber of Commerce and the Pinellas, Florida, Public School System; (3) the State of Mississippi and the Mississippi Economic Development Council; and (4) the State of California and the California Business Roundtable. (BJD)

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THE ROLE OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY IN IMPROVING THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

before the

National Forum on Excellence in Education

by

James B. Campbell

December 8, 1983

My name is Jim Campbell, President of MISSCO Corporation, and Chairman of the United States Chamber of Commerce's Education, Employment and Training Committee.

I appreciate this opportunity to present the Chamber's views on the roles and responsibilities of the business community in improving the American education system.

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The members of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have a keen interest in improving the quality of the American education system and in contributing to national, state, and most particularly to local efforts designed to improve our schools and help our students. The reason for this is very simple--business leaders not only operate this country's factories, restaurants, insurance companies, service stations, and construction firms, they are also parents, teachers, school board members, teacher aides, and taxpayers in every community in this nation.

Business Involvement in Education

Historically, the business community has been active in educational issues. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has had an active education policy committee since the 1960's. This Committee and the Board of Directors have been actively involved in shaping federal education policy. Strong local and state school systems have also assisted state and local chambers of commerce in effectively attracting industrial/business development clients. Further, countless business leaders have served on state and local school boards, parent-teacher associations, advisory boards, and school finance committees throughout the country. As a result, the business community's interest in educational improvement and excellence is well-founded in a partnership with educators that dates back to the turn of the century. We know that history is not kind to idlers and the time is past when we as Americans can rest on past accomplishments and our abundance of natural and human resources.

New Challenges Facing Business and Education Leaders:

There are new challenges that face business education leaders. These challenges highlight the pressing and immense need for additional business-education partnerships, and are based on a series of studies of national prominence, such as A Nation At Risk. Let's look at just three conclusions or conditions that these studies have identified.

First, the dramatic increase in teen and adult illiteracy rates in the United States. At the present time, the federal government estimates that 27 million Americans are functionally illiterate, which translates to approximately one out of every nine Americans. In addition, it is estimated that each year 850,000 American teenagers drop out of high school. As a businessman and as a parent, I find these statistics sobering and unacceptable. As a democracy, we cannot afford to lose the vital contribution of any American--let alone 850,000 members of our next generation, and that sets the stage for the next conclusion.

Second, this country is facing severe shortages of skilled workers. In the past decade, employment opportunities for Americans have made a dramatic shift from manufacturing and industrial jobs to service/high technology jobs. In addition, a vast majority--some 80%--of future job openings will be offered by small employers (less than 100 employees). The federal government estimates that during this decade, 17-19 million new jobs will be created. The greatest number of these opportunities will be in such areas as insurance, real estate, hotel service and management, banking, and auto repair. Many of these service-oriented jobs will not require traditional four-year college degrees but rather call upon the kind of education, training, and retraining available through the vocational and career education programs of the public school system.

In addition, quoting A Nation At Risk, "The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skills, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life."

Third, the United States is encountering unprecedented international competition. American business and education leadership has long seen the importance of education and training in the development of domestic and international markets. All Americans have come to realize that sustained economic growth requires the development of a well-educated citizenry, which functions in a democracy--a free society--and is economically capable of purchasing the products of American business. We must be capable of not only producing competitive products for our own country, but also for the world. The basic foundation of this is a strong and prospering education system. Further, as stated in A Nation At Risk, "Learning is the indespensable investment required for success in the "information age" we are entering."

Success Stories

In recent years educators and business leaders have used this partnership to produce a series of education improvement "success stories." Activities have included executive volunteers to school systems, adopt-a-school programs, fellowships and internships for teachers, loaned equipment, and support of new school financing initiatives. Some examples of these partnerships are:

- o Tenneco Oil Company and the Houston Independent School District. The Tenneco Oil Company flies in University of Texas professors to teach geology courses to high school students;
- o Pinellas Suncoast Chamber of Commerce and the Pinellas Public School System. The Chamber currently sponsors an economic course entitled "Educational Excellence: A Shared Commitment" at the University of South Florida. This program has marshalled the resources of 163 business volunteers, that have contributed over 1,500 hours and served 89,000 students;
- o State of Mississippi and the Mississippi Economic Development Council. In an effort to finance mandatory kindergarten for school children and increase teacher salaries in the state of Mississippi, the business community helped supported legislation that will increase corporate taxes by $80 million annually; and
- o State of California and the California Business Roundtable. Recognizing the need to better equip California public school students in the skills of reading, writing, mathematics, and science, the business community--working with education and political leaders--fully supported an $800 million increase in taxes for public education.